

# 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021 – Morning Service

## MHA Sunday

Martin Rider

### Call to Worship - Psalm 46:7-11

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Amen.

In the middle of the Nineteenth Century, Revd. Walter Chalmers Smith wrote a magnificent hymn of praise which, despite its dated language, is still very popular. We know little about him except that, in 1893, he became Moderator of the Free Churches of Scotland.

### StF 55 – Immortal, invisible, God only wise

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| 1) Immortal, invisible, God only wise,<br>In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,<br>Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient<br>of Days,<br>Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.                   | 4) Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,<br>Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;<br>All laud we would render; O help us to see<br>'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee. |
| 2) Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,<br>Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might –<br>Thy justice like mountains high soaring above<br>Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness<br>and love.  | 5) Immortal, invisible, God only wise,<br>In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,<br>Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient<br>of Days,<br>Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.       |
| 3) To all life thou givest, to both great and small;<br>In all life thou livest, the true life of all.<br>We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,<br>And wither and perish; but naught<br>changeth thee. |   |

*Walter Chalmers Smith*

*CCL No. 515642*

### Introduction

Today is Methodist Homes Sunday and it is an opportunity to give thanks and reflect on the support given to over 18,500 older people through MHA's care homes, retirement living schemes and MHA Communities schemes. It has been an incredibly challenging year for MHA as it has for many others. There has been an out-pouring of prayers and support from the church community to MHA and that has really encouraged and helped MHA's staff, volunteers, residents and members. On their behalf, thank you.

Part of MHA's vision is for people to find meaning and hope in later life and to tackle loneliness and isolation. MHA seek do to this through their chaplaincy service, providing spiritual for the happy and the darkest of times, music therapy helping people living with dementia and community groups partnering with the church to reach out in to our neighbourhoods tackling loneliness and isolation through MHA Communities. All of this has continued throughout the pandemic, and now a new digital service is being offered, MHA Digital Communities, to connect people into a virtual community wherever they are – providing wellbeing, friendship groups, spiritual and religious care.

Our theme today is relieving loneliness and bringing hope. I shall begin with a brief story about Anthony and Tanya. Just in case anybody is confused by the title, 'MHA Communities', it is the new name for the 'Live at Home Scheme', which has been developed and improved, despite the coronavirus pandemic. We enable older people to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible, helping them to live later life well. MHA Communities offer a variety of exciting and fulfilling social and online activities and services for people aged 55 and over. From telephone befriending and online activities to dance and exercise classes and assisted shopping, there's something to suit people of all abilities.

Anthony is a member of one of our MHA Communities, South & West Birmingham and has been blind from birth. He would always bring his guide dog, Rodney, along to activities before lockdown. However, in recent months, Anthony began to lose confidence in leaving the house and started to become isolated. Our MHA Communities colleagues found out that on two occasions when he went out walking, he was threatened for money and was also the victim of a pickpocket. Understandably, this led to Anthony feeling like he didn't want to leave the house. After concerns were raised about Anthony's mental wellbeing, MHA Communities manager, Tanya, stepped in to help him. They started going on a walk twice a week with Rodney.

During lockdown, Tanya, the scheme manager, noticed a change in Anthony's behaviour and was concerned about his lack of social interaction. She kept in regular contact with Anthony and decided to start meeting him to walk with him and Rodney, despite Government restrictions. Tanya was able to work out a way to continue walking three times a week, socially distanced and with masks, as she knew the importance of connection with others for Anthony at this time.

People like Tanya embody our charity's values, our colleagues are dedicated to enabling people to live later life well. Anthony's confidence has grown through his support from Tanya and the MHA Communities team. This is just one example of how MHA Communities impact our member's lives, and support them in all aspects of life.

### **Prayers of Praise, Thanksgiving and Confession**

Lord of all, we praise you for your loving presence with us through both good times and difficult times. You know each of us by name and call us into communion with you and one another. Throughout Jesus' ministry on earth you welcomed the outsiders, for your love is for all people and knows no bounds. You showed your ultimate love by coming amongst us as one of us, leaving behind all heavenly splendour to experience the joys and hurts, highs and lows, laughter and tears, hopes and disappointments. Yet you remained obedient and full of love, and lived, served and died for us. You were raised from the dead and offer us everlasting life. And so we declare your holiness, majesty and beauty that radiates from all that is around us. And we, with all creation, shout praise to you. Glory, power and praise be given to you O God.

**Amen.**

Heavenly Father, we give thanks for your faithfulness to us: for the outpouring of your love and grace and for all that you have promised to us; for your love that has guided us through life, and will continue to be with us; for all that you do for us, give us and accomplish in us, we offer heartfelt thanks.

Lord, as we recognise your goodness and love, all that you have given to us, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, your continued presence through your Holy Spirit, we offer our heartfelt thanks. We give thanks, too, for communities where all are included and made to feel welcome. However, your grace brings to our minds the things we do, think and say that fall short of all that you call us to be.

As we reflect on loneliness and isolation, we ask for your forgiveness in the way that we have contributed to others feeling unwelcome in our midst. We confess the things that we haven't said or done which could have helped others feel more included. We offer our confession for the ways in which people still exist on the margins.

[Silence]

Lord forgive us, and renew us in the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you. We thank you that you call us to be part of your Kingdom in the here and now and ask that the might of the Holy Spirit and the example of Jesus Christ will empower and guide our discipleship. **Amen.**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

Our next hymn was written by Richard Gillard, who was born in Wiltshire in England but emigrated to New Zealand with his family when he was three years old. He had no formal musical training. He wrote the third verse first, in early 1976, but didn't complete both hymn and melody until late 1977. I think it was worth the wait.

### **StF 611 – Brother, sister let me serve you**

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| 1) Brother, sister let me serve you<br>Let me be as Christ to you;<br>Pray that I may have the grace<br>To let you be my servant, too.             | 4) I will weep when you are weeping,<br>When you laugh I'll laugh with you;<br>I will share your joy and sorrow<br>Till we've seen this journey through. |
| 2) We are pilgrims on a journey,<br>And companions on the road;<br>We are here to help each other<br>Walk the mile and bear the load.              | 5) When we sing to God in heaven<br>We shall find such harmony,<br>Born of all we've known together<br>Of Christ's love and agony.                       |
| 3) I will hold the Christ light for you<br>In the night-time of your fear;<br>I will hold my hand out to you,<br>Speak the peace you long to hear. | 6) Brother, sister let me serve you<br>Let me be as Christ to you;<br>Pray that I may have the grace<br>To let you be my servant, too.                   |

*Richard A M Gillard © 1977 Scripture in Song CCL No. 515642*

### **Reading: Mark 5:1-20**

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no-one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No-one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.

When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region. As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. Amen.

### **Sermon - "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." Mark 5:9**

Our theme for today is relieving loneliness and bringing hope, and we see this in action in our Bible reading today. There's much we can unpack from the reading, but the heart of the story is Jesus' compassion for a man who had been forced to live on the margins of his society. It wasn't a national lockdown that contributed to his loneliness and we can speculate about what was happening to this man; nowadays, we might suggest he was suffering from schizophrenia, but the idea of being filled with demonic forces certainly made a lot of sense two thousand years ago, because people thought the demons could infect them, too. He called himself Legion, showing the extent of his plight. The significance of the story is in how Jesus approached him and how that approach contrasted with the way the villagers dealt with him. Legion had been chained up, forced to live in a graveyard, a place deemed unclean by Jews and had been shunned. He was isolated by a society who feared him and showed his anguish by howling and self-harming. Rejected by everybody, Legion came to Christ in search of peace and met with compassion, not condemnation or revulsion. Jesus ended his torment and isolation, restoring Legion to wholeness, body, mind and spirit. He wasn't prepared for the man to suffer any longer, but offered him dignity and hope. By doing so, Christ gives us a model for pastoral care and for challenging cultural norms. It is a model we should copy.

This pandemic has meant that many of us have gained personal insight into what it means to be socially isolated, lonely, or both. Face-to-face interactions and social activities has become largely obsolete, working from home has become the norm and we have had to remain within our postcode, unable to travel. MHA staff, chaplains and volunteers have been working tirelessly with people who have been forced into extreme isolation, not just in our care homes, but in retirement living and in community schemes, too. Residents didn't only face the usual COVID rules, for in care homes, they had only PPE wearing staff to see and when an outbreak occurred you might imagine how it must have felt to be in the most vulnerable category when the person who lives in the room next you had died from coronavirus, and when the person who lived in the room opposite you also died from COVID, and when a carer was now in Intensive Care on a ventilator ..... it's a lonely, isolated place.

Throughout the pandemic, in the same way as carers have served, MHA chaplains have been going into lonely residents' rooms wearing PPE, holding hands, praying, talking, trying to raise their spirits. All of us, residents carers and chaplains, were afraid, but we supported residents and their families anyway. We have all been challenged by the loneliness and social isolation that we see around us. MHA homes, many churches and services across MHA have responded to where the need is. We've befriended, picked up prescriptions, gone shopping for others and we continue to find ways to relieve loneliness and bring hope. The story of Anthony receiving loving support so he could regain his dignity, find new-friendship and self-confidence is representative of some of the healing people have received through churches and MHA Communities.

Coronavirus has brought the issue of loneliness and isolation into the public domain. We have seen their effect and following Jesus requires us to take action, to be radically inclusive and offer generous hospitality. The work of MHA, both in care homes and those living in the wider community, haven't just continued as they always have and nor has the church. We have had to learn to adapt. MHA and churches have used technology to break down those boundaries that kept residents and members of our congregations feeling isolated.

MHA's new Digital Communities are relieving loneliness by reaching out to people in their own homes. A 92 year-old using Skype for the first time to talk to their family; someone at end of life being prayed with and for through a video call; or someone isolating at home but being able to join their closest friends at a virtual coffee morning.

As COVID restrictions draw to an end, we can hope that together we can ensure that the work of MHA Communities can thrive so that more people like Anthony can be supported, chaplains can continue to be alongside our residents and staff as they continue to heal and today your support will help us reach thousands of others through MHA Digital Communities, meaning that those in our churches and in our communities can be connected. The last sixteen months have been a time of lamentation for most of us, with so many lives lost, their families grieving, so much horror and so many tears. Yet out of this horror new ways of worshipping have been found, new ways of breaking down the walls we put up around each other have been discovered. Comfort has been given to those who most needed it, in the darkest moments.

Your actions, however small or large, will have made an impact in reducing loneliness during the pandemic. Today, MHA is inviting you to do that even more by asking you to consider donating to support their work in relieving loneliness and bringing hope to even more people. We are asking you to support their MHA Communities work like the one we heard about in the story of Anthony and Tanya, if there is one within reach. Perhaps you could consider volunteering, maybe becoming a befriender? And where there isn't a MHA Communities scheme in your area there is the new MHA Digital Communities, virtually bringing people together, offering wellbeing and spiritual and religious support to people all over the country, or, of course, our churches could reach out to people in our community who are isolated and lonely. May God continue to guide us, inspire us and be with us as together we seek to relieve loneliness and bring hope to as many people. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Graham Kendrick for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and followed Kendrick's visit to India the previous year.

### **StF 693 – Beauty for brokenness**

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| 1) Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,<br>Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.<br>Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,<br>Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!                    | 3) Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,<br>Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.<br>Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth<br>to green,<br>Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain. |
| 2) Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,<br>Work for all people, trade for their skills;<br>Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,<br>Voices to plead the cause of those<br>who can't speak. | 4) Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams<br>Plundered and poisoned – our future,<br>our dreams.<br>Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;<br>Make us content with the things that we need.   |
| <i>Ch) God of the poor, friend of the weak,<br/>Give us compassion we pray:<br/>Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;<br/>Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.</i>                           | 5) Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame<br>Until your justice burns brightly again;<br>Until the nations learn of your ways,<br>Seek your salvation and bring you their praise                      |

Graham Kendrick © 1993 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

## Prayers of Intercession

Almighty God, we have no doubt that all things are possible for you and this is a great comfort to us in our discipleship, for we are aware how limited our own powers are. Guide and help us as we strive to answer our call to serve Christ Jesus, but when the best we can do is not enough, then reach out and move people who can heal some of the world's brokenness to act instead.

God of shalom, of peace and unity, we grieve about the conflicts in so many parts of the world and so we pray for the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice. Breathe your Spirit upon national leaders and guide them along the paths of peace, mercy and justice.

Loving Lord, we pray for people who are campaigning against pollution and irresponsible consumerism, so that this planet will remain habitable for future generations. We pray, too, for people who campaign for a fair and proper distribution of coronavirus vaccines to the Developing Nations as well as countries like India and Brazil, where many people are suffering with and dying from coronavirus and where health systems are breaking down.

Holy God, we ask a blessing on our church, churches in our Circuit and the World Church that we may a blessing to our communities, particularly as we move out of restrictions caused by COVID19. Teach us to set aside our divisions and differences, so we learn to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission. Use our love, gifts and graces to not only address the needs of our community, but to help the uncommitted accept Jesus as the friend, Lord and Saviour of the world.

Heavenly Father, we pray for people living with a dementia, whose distress has been increased by this pandemic. Remember, in your mercy, their families, friends and carers who are struggling to cope, too. Grant them all the support they need to keep going. Hear our prayer for people we know who are sick in body, mind or spirit; for people in our community who are isolated or lonely, particularly neighbours whose loneliness has been exacerbated because of COVID restrictions. We remember before you those who are in any kind of need or trouble; everyone who is living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and, in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned. *[Silence]* Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but embrace them with your love, so they may be comforted and find healing, courage, hope and enduring peace.

God of grace, we ask your blessing upon everybody who is working for our wellbeing, especially members of the NHS, scientists who are developing vaccines and cures and key-workers, as they try to bring us through these days of anguish. Today, we ask your blessing on everyone at Methodist Homes as we seek the wellbeing of our communities. Keep everyone for whom we pray safe and grant them success in their work.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us live righteous lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers and living our Good News in words and deeds, through Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen.**

Here is a prayer from Les, a resident of MHA Harwood Court care home in Newcastle upon Tyne: We pray for those on the margins of our society and those in our communities living alone without loved ones to support them. We pray that You will open our eyes to the needs of older men and women within our midst, open our hearts to accommodate them and our minds to understand how what we do affects them. We pray, especially today for the work of MHA and all it does to enhance the life experience of older people, including people living with dementia. We pray for the work of MHA Communities as they seek to relieve loneliness and isolation, and particularly for the new work of Digital Communities reducing loneliness and bringing hope to people everywhere. We pray that all people may learn of Your Love and Grace which are available to all and that reminds us we are never alone. We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Friend. **Amen.**

In 1965, Sydney Carter wrote a hymn, based on Jesus teaching in Matthew chapter 25 verses 44 and 45. I caught the mood of the time and was often sung by folk singers as a protest song. I believe one of the first times I heard it sung was by the Spinners at Birmingham Town Hall about half a century ago.

### **StF 256 – When I needed a neighbour**

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| 1) When I needed a neighbour,<br>Were you there, were you there?<br>When I needed a neighbour, were you there? | 4) When I needed a shelter,<br>Were you there, were you there?<br>When I needed a shelter, were you there? |
| <i>Ch) And the creed and the colour<br/>And the name won't matter,<br/>Were you there?</i>                     | 5) When I needed a healer,<br>Were you there, were you there?<br>When I needed a healer, were you there?   |
| 2) I was hungry and thirsty,<br>Were you there, were you there?<br>I was hungry and thirsty, were you there?   | 6) Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,<br>Wherever you travel, I'll be there,               |
| 3) I was cold, I was naked,<br>Were you there, were you there?<br>I was cold, I was naked, were you there?     | <i>E) And the creed and the colour<br/>And the name won't matter,<br/>I'll be there?</i>                   |

Sydney Carter © 1965 Stainer & Bell Ltd CCL No. 515642

### **Closing prayer & Blessing**

May the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remain with us now and always. O Lord, send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory. In the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.